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| [See more articles from Lancaster+New+Era+Lancaster%2c+PA](http://www.highbeam.com/Search.aspx?pid=61193%7c%7c%7c151929&sort=DT&sortdir=D) | **A clash of cultures; Amish firemen with beards can't get the official training they need. Breathing masks won't fit properly over the beards, according to state regulations. But firemen and officials here say modern masks make the rules obsolete.**  Article from:  [**Lancaster New Era Lancaster, PA**](http://www.highbeam.com/Search.aspx?pid=61193%7c%7c%7c151929&sort=DT&sortdir=D)  Article date:  [**March 30, 2004**](http://www.highbeam.com/Search.aspx?q=%20pubdate:%5b20040327;20040402%5d)  Author:  [**Bernard Harris**](http://www.highbeam.com/Search.aspx?q=author:%22Bernard+Harris%22) |

In the early 19th century, firemen grew beards so they could wet their whiskers and place them in their mouths before entering burning buildings.

They would breathe through their beards to filter the smoke.

Two centuries later, those beards present a problem. Firefighters with facial hair are prohibited from training while wearing a protective breathing mask. The standard particularly hits married Amish men, who wear beards as part of their religion.

Some local fire chiefs are concerned because the mask rule prevents Amish men from receiving enough training. And Amish firefighters make up the backbone of many eastern and southern Lancaster County fire companies. Although an exact count isn't possible, there may be 200 to 300 of them, said county emergency management Director Randy Gockley.

The mask rule, which was drafted by a national firefighters' association and adopted by the federal government and the State Fire Academy, represents a clash of cultures between the Amish and the broader society.

Local fire chiefs see the rule as pointless and want it changed.

"Our biggest thing is just getting these guys the training that they need," said Bob Devonshire, chief of the Strasburg Fire Company.

Tim Horner, the Bird-in-Hand fire chief, agrees: "If we go to a working barn fire during the day between here and Intercourse, probably 70 percent of the these guys are going to be Amish and at least three-quarters of them are going to have beards."

Horner maintained it is imperative that they be allowed to train in state-sanctioned events.

Devonshire and Horner want the state to repeal the rule, make an exception for firefighters who have facial hair for religious reasons, or have Congress address the issue.But state and federal officials say they are unable to make a change.

One of the places that married Amish men, or any other bearded firefighters, will be prohibited from taking hands-on training will be the county's new Public Safety Training Center. The $12.7 million, state-of-the-art facility is expected to open next month.

The center will have areas where firefighters will be able to enter a burning building, battle a car fire, find their way through a smoky maze and douse a blazing liquid-fuel spill.

All of those areas will be off-limits to bearded firefighters, said Gockley.

"The Amish can participate in the class, and at the end, the Amish firefighter has probably learned everything that a non-Amish firefighter has learned ... but the instructor cannot acknowledge the firefighter successfully completing the course because of their beard and the NFPA standards," said Gockley.

The rules of the National Fire Protection Association, a national firefighters' group, were adopted by the Pennsylvania Fire Academy and will be followed at the new county facility.

Devonshire believes the rules are rooted in "yesterday's technology" and held in place by a litigious society.

They were devised more than two decades ago when "negative pressure" masks permitted firefighters to draw in harmful smoke from outside the mask if they did not have an air-tight seal around their face.

Current air masks have "positive pressure," in which one to two pounds of pressure from the air tank is always in the mask. If a firefighter does not have a tight seal, air leaks out from inside the mask, he said.

"That prevents from happening what the state says will happen," Devonshire said.

An Amish firefighter with the Bird-in-Hand Fire Company agrees. The fireman, who asked that his name not be used, said he wore a mask on the job for six years before he wed and grew a beard. Since then, he has noticed no difference in the mask's performance.

"It has nothing to do with beards or no beards. It's if you don't get a seal," he said of using a mask.

As a young, beardless fireman, he has donned a mask and failed to get a tight seal. He attributes that to being excited and inexperienced.

"I never had a problem with a face shield since I've had a beard," the Amish man said.

Jim Lingg believes it.

Lingg, a state fire instructor, said firefighters undergo "fit tests," in which they don masks and enter tents filled with strong- odored "banana oil."

They try to shake their masks loose by doing exercises such as running in place.

Lingg did not know of any bearded firefighter who failed to get a good seal on his mask and detected the odor.

Lingg, of Strasburg, supports Devonshire and Horner's efforts to have the rule changed - so he would not be in violation of it.

Lingg said he decided several years ago that the Amish needed to be trained with masks. "Let the chips fall where they may," he said.

He teaches groups of as many as 80 Amish in classes at fire halls, rather than at the state academy.

"If we don't, they are still going to fight fire - with or without the appropriate training - and the risk is that without the appropriate training, they're going to die," Lingg said.

"It sounds dramatic, but that is correct. There is no upside to it, of them not having training.

"We owe it to these guys. They are out there risking their lives. We owe them the appropriate training. It's as simple as that."

He'd like for the Amish to be able to participate in hands-on training, such as the controlled burning of buildings or the exercises at the training center.

Horner said that Bird-in-Hand does as much as it can at the fire company level.

"We push the envelope here with training," the fire chief said of offering non-fire academy training.

"What we're doing basically is breaking the rules," said Horner. Then, he quickly rephrased his statement: "What we're doing is not following the guideline."

The fire chiefs said they'd like for their Amish firefighters to be given the opportunity to advance beyond the basic "Essentials of Firefighting" class to the "Firefighter 1" or "Firefighter 2" certification courses offered at the fire academy and elsewhere. Those classes require firefighters to wear masks.

Although there are many Amish firefighters in the county, few bother to sign up for the advanced classes, said Horner.

"The state is trying real hard to get everybody else up to speed - to participate in a training program - and we're no different," Lingg said of Lancaster County.

There are no minimum training requirements for firefighters set by the county or state, but the state is trying to entice firefighters to receive advanced training. They are doing so through incentives such as giving preferential treatment for competitive grants to companies whose members have received more training.

Horner contends that penalizes fire companies with Amish members because the Amish are barred from that training. Nearly half of Bird- in-Hand's 63 active firefighters are Amish.

He believes the problem could be addressed with something as simple as a legal waiver of responsibility or release that would allow Amish to participate in training.

"My hope is that there would be a mechanism put in place that will allow firefighters to get the training they need and know the risks involved," he said.

Horner said the issue of the mask training rule was raised last summer in a series of meetings held by state Sen. Noah Wenger.

Wenger said that if it is determined that the technology has made the facial hair rule unnecessary, then "we may be able to make some kind of change."

The senator said he is not planning to draft legislation to address the issue. Instead, he has referred it to state fire officials.

"We've looked at it and I have suggested to the fire commissioner that he find a way to deal with that," said Wenger.

State Rep. Scott Boyd, who represents much of the Amish areas in the eastern and southern portions of the county, said he has also talked with state Fire Commissioner Edward Mann about the issue.

He asked Mann to relax the facial hair requirement. Mann told him that mask manufacturers had no interest in a waiver. They feared liability for the failure of their product, said Boyd.

So Boyd said he asked Mann to give consideration to fire companies with Amish members when weighing grant applications.

Boyd said he does not believe there is anything else that he can do.

"I don't think there is something we can do legislatively," said Boyd. "What can we change? It's really not a law. It's the state fire marshal standard and a federal standard."

Reached at his Harrisburg office, Mann said he cannot change the policy in the face of a national standard and manufacturers' requirements prohibiting mask wearers from having facial hair.

After being approached about the issue last summer, Mann said he contacted officials in Ohio and Indiana - states that also have Amish firefighters. He found that those states have the same prohibition.

If local firefighters want the rule changed, Mann said, they must "provide him with a manufacturer willing to step up and say this is not an issue. Then we will re-evaluate the policy."

Devonshire, the Strasburg fire chief, said it may be an issue for U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts.

It was Pitts, Lancaster County's congressman, who championed legislation that allows Amish children as young as 14 to work with machinery. Pitts said the provision helps protect religious liberty and the Amish way of life.

Yet Pitts spokesman Derek Karchner said they could find nothing in federal law that applies to Amish firefighters and wearing of protective breathing masks.

The rule, at the federal level, is a regulation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Karchner said Pitts has contacted the Department of Labor about the OSHA rule.

"At this point, we're not sure what we can do, but Congressman Pitts is checking into it," said Karchner.

Devonshire is convinced that something has to change.

"I understand from a liability standpoint that they can't make exceptions," said Devonshire.

"But I also understand that these guys are going to go into a burning building and I need to get them the best training I can."

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